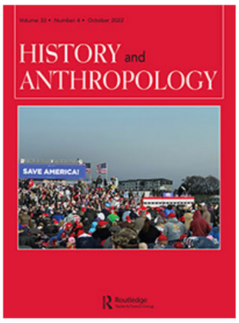

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Luigi M. Solivetti

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US Social scientists of the 1950s in the Mezzogiorno and Ernesto de Martino: Two divergent approaches to history and development

Luigi M. Solivetti

Department of Social Sciences and Economics, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT

In the 1950s, several US scholars came to Italy to study the Mezzogiorno, that is the Southern region. Their aim was to suggest how to solve the 'backwardness' of a Cold War disputed region, split into two political and opposing camps. The relationship between those scholars and the Italian intelligentsia was difficult. Surprisingly, they never found common ground with the best-known Italian anthropologist of that time, Ernesto de Martino, whose prominence would be internationally acknowledged. US scholars and de Martino could not appreciate each other because their approaches were divergent, particularly their visions of history and the determinants of change and development. US researchers regarded change/development as a zero-sum game, in which new cultural and ethical attitudes should have replaced old ones. De Martino had an anti-empirical, non-zero-sum vision of change and thought that the future would have arisen only from a profound fusion of past and present. US researchers, also owing to American exceptionalism, were scarcely interested in history, and they preferred to focus on the present interaction between attitudes, environment, and the inner world. Despite his joining the Italian Communist Party, de Martino was deeply influenced by neo-idealistic philosophy, and his anthropology revolved around history and culture. He criticized both the presentism and ethnocentrism of classical social anthropology: and his emphasis on hegemony, oppression and resilience in subaltern people made him a pioneer of the open-engagement approach of contemporary social science.

KEYWORDS

US social science; E.C. Banfield; E. de Martino; neo-idealist anthropology; history and development

Preliminary considerations

After the fall of Fascism and the restoration of relationships between Italy and the US, several North American social scientists came to Italy, also encouraged by the opportunities – for example Fulbright and Rockefeller scholarships – offered by US institutions interested in, and concerned about, the situation in Italy. The country presented problems of post-war economic reconstruction and underdevelopment in the Mezzogiorno, as well as political problems. With the largest Communist Party in the Western world, Italy was indeed a Cold War disputed region, split into two politically opposing camps.

CONTACT Luigi M. Solivetti luigi.solivetti@uniroma1.it Department of Social Sciences and Economics, Sapienza University of Rome, Piazzale A. Moro, 5, Rome, 00185, Italy

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The US social scientists' main field of research would be the conditions of Southern Italy and, more specifically, of its least developed areas that were eloquently labelled as *backward*. And it was just in those areas, sometimes in the very same places they were studying, that Ernesto de Martino, the best-known Italian anthropologist, was at the same time conducting his field research. De Martino, whose scientific relevance would be internationally acknowledged (Saunders 1993; Gallini and Massenzio 1997; Lüdtke 2008; Berrocal 2009; Fabre 2013; Zinn 2015; Geisshuesler 2021), had already published *Naturalismo e storicismo nell'etnologia* (*Naturalism and Historicism in Ethnology*) (1941) and, a few years later, *Il mondo magico* (1948), translated as *Primitive Magic* (1988), both of which had raised interest and a major debate. He would later publish further works, among which were highly praised ethnographic volumes such as *Morte e pianto rituale* (1958), *Magic: A Theory from the South* (1959, 2015), and *The Land of Remorse* (1961, 2005). De Martino and the overseas researchers did come in touch (de Martino 1986; Angelini 1990; Tentori 2004, 66–77), but no significant result came of that, and they ignored each other in their publications. The present paper, while aiming to identify, against the 1950s backdrop, the theoretical stances separating the main characters of this missed encounter, intends to show the long-term contribution they made to social science. First, both US researchers and de Martino significantly contributed to acknowledging culture as the key factor of change and development. Second, the comparison between US researchers and de Martino helps elucidate the latter's importance as one of the earliest champions of the use of history in anthropology. It was his historical approach that made a significant contribution to the overcoming of ethnocentrism in the social sciences. Although intimately related to a long-gone historical scenario, all this can tell much to contemporary scholars about anthropology and politics, idealism vs pragmatism, development vs progress, social capital vs State economic interventionism, and cultural, spiritual and material determinants of change.

Background: US researchers in the Mezzogiorno

George Peck was doubtless a pioneer among his colleagues. Peck, already in Italy in 1949, came into contact with Rocco Scotellaro, a poet and mayor of the Tricarico town in the Basilicata region. There, with the help of Scotellaro and other local researchers (Mazzarone 1978), Peck carried out the first Italian experiment in community studies in 1951. His investigations on geographically confined communities aimed at understanding wider social processes. Little of his work got published (Peck 1953, 1989), but Scotellaro, his close aide, published a widely cited book of peasant life stories (1954) that followed Peck's scheme for interviews meant to study peasants' attitudes (Marselli 1962). Another pioneer of these studies was Fredrick Friedmann. Following a suggestion of Carlo Levi – whose *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945, 1947) is a good example of how literature may anticipate social research – he devoted his attention as early as 1951 to problems of development in the Calabria and Lucania regions. With the support of the UN (UNRRA) and of Adriano Olivetti – the progressive entrepreneur who was advocating the replacement of the centralized State with a federal union of local communities – Friedmann directed an innovative research project in the Matera 'Sassi' area, introducing the use of a multidisciplinary research group (Friedmann 1952, 1953, 1996, 2006). Friedmann's works found international resonance; for example Robert Redfield widely referred to Friedmann's findings in his well-known *Peasant Society and Culture* (Redfield 1956, 63–79). Later on, Friedmann (1960) carried out an analysis of the battle for literacy going on at that time in the Mezzogiorno.

Donald Pitkin, an anthropologist, conducted field research at Sermoneta (in the Latina province) from 1952 on, for his doctoral dissertation (Pitkin 1954). Further publications would derive from that research, some of them much later (1959a, 1959b, 1960, 1985, 1990, 1992). Leonard Moss and Stephen Cappannari, both anthropologists, conducted field research in a village in Molise, Bagnoli del Trigno (nicknamed by them Cortina d'Aglio, that is Garlic Barrier), between 1954 and 1956 (Moss and Thomson 1959; Moss and Cappannari 1960a, 1960b, 1962; Moss 1981). Edward Banfield, a socio-political scientist, by far the best known of all these US authors, conducted community-based research at Chiaromonte, a village in Basilicata, in 1954–1955. From this experience, he derived, along with his wife, Laura Fasano, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Banfield 1958, 1976). This publication – a 'small book [that] packs a terrific punch', as the *American Journal of Sociology* wrote (Sanders 1959) – made him one of the leading, though most controversial, social scientists of his generation. Another American expatriate writer, Ann Cornelisen, visited the Mezzogiorno in 1954 and thereafter. She established a nursery school in Tricarico, about which she would later write a popular essay (Cornelisen 1969). In 1957, Frank Cancian, a cultural anthropologist, analysed the impact of the natives' 'world view' on the socio-political organization of a village in the Campania region (Cancian 1961). The book on the Italian labour movement by LaPalombara (1957), a political scientist, was also published in the same year, while in 1958 Joseph Lopreato would begin his field research at Stefanaconi, the village in Calabria from which he had migrated to the US. From this research, he drew several articles (Lopreato 1961a, 1961b, 1962, 1965; Lopreato and Saltzman 1968) and a book which had a considerable impact, *Peasants No More* (1967), on the predicament of farmworkers in the Mezzogiorno. Again in 1958, Anne, Talcott Parsons' daughter, would arrive in Naples, where she would research family structure and mental disease (Parsons 1961, 1969).

This influx of US social scientists did not stop with the end of the 1950s. It testified to an interest in Italian society that transcended the international political contingencies of the postwar period. The results of further research projects in the Mezzogiorno would appear in the following years. It is worth recalling those by several anthropologists: Silverman (1965, 1966, 1968, 1975), Antinoro-Polizzi (1968, 1971), Peter Schneider (1969), Galt (1973, 1974, 1991), Miller (1974), Jane Schneider (1976), Miller and Miller (1978), Belmonte (1979), Kertzer and Hogan (1989); the social history book by Bell (1979) and that by Tarrow (1967), a political scientist. Later, Robert Putnam's book appeared on the development of Italian regions (Putnam 1993): a book presenting a close link with the US researchers' work of the 1950s. Putnam, a political scientist, would take up Banfields's main thesis, which could be found earlier in Friedmann's, much earlier, indeed, in other foreign authors (Spring 2016), such as Douglas (1915) and, later, in the studies of Moss and Cappannari, Lopreato and Galt: namely, the presence of a culture unsupportive of, if not antagonistic to, cooperation, mutual trust and respect, responsible (it was claimed) for the local lack of development. From this thesis, Putnam would derive inspiration for endorsing a research trend that would become relevant in contemporary social sciences, namely the social capital trend: a conceptual crossroads in which *non-événementielle* history, political science, and sociology would meet and enrich one another.

Therefore, the relevance of social science studies by US authors in Italy did not wane over the years. Indeed, the trend of their studies would attract more researchers from various countries: among them, British authors such as Davis (1970, 1973) and Allum (1973), and others, such as the Dutch Blok (1974). However, the 1950s represent a unique opportunity in terms of comparative analysis, also owing to the differences existing at that time between the visiting researchers and their Italian counterparts.

When the first US social scientists began to arrive, Italy was emerging from a long period in which New Idealism and Fascist hostility to the social sciences had eradicated just about everything in those sciences, bar population studies and clinical criminology. Journals of sociology had disappeared, and only in 1951 did scholars dare to launch a new one, *Quaderni di sociologia* (*Sociology Notebooks*), eloquently edited at the start in a semi-clandestine format, a little larger than a postcard. There were no chairs of sociology in the Italian Universities at that time. Only in 1961 was a new one established. As for ethnology, the first chair was established only in 1967, although Fascism had not been hostile to idealism-oriented ethnology (Saunders 1984). Thus, in 1957, the *American Sociological Review* would write that Italy – in terms of social studies – was still virgin territory (Rapport, Cappannari, and Moss 1957).

On the contrary, the US researchers were coming from a society in which social studies, far from being neglected, were deeply interwoven with federal and local policies oriented towards research meant to favour social change. The distance that separated researchers coming from a country with perhaps the most advanced experience in social studies anywhere in the world, and those from a country, such as Italy, with markedly different characteristics, was so great that it was to make any mutual understanding problematic.

One exception, however, was represented by the Portici Agricultural Studies Department. There, a few social scientists who were studying the Mezzogiorno's socioeconomic peculiarity (Marselli 1958; Rossi-Doria 1958a, 1958b; Marselli and Sibilio 1991) – namely the US researchers' main focus of interest – interacted with overseas researchers and fully acknowledged their influence:

> Each of us – who had not received any regular training [in social sciences] in our Universities – started to learn [from them] as if he was attending a course of sociology or applied social research. […] Thanks to them, today we too can deal with what is regarded as modern social research; we can think of managing this research work by ourselves, and we have something to say at international conferences. […] We must acknowledge that they enabled us to realistically tackle certain issues of our *questione meridionale*. (Marselli 1962, 190)

A further attempt at understanding the Mezzogiorno and its problems, however, had already been made by those Italian scholars who did not regard themselves as belonging to the social sciences, since they were studying the 'anthropological' situation of the human being in the world. The most original among them was, no doubt, Ernesto de Martino.

In the following pages, we will try to identify the characteristics of the research of both groups to understand the models underlying the work of each. As for the 'American model', we shall refer to the most important studies conducted in the 1950s about the Mezzogiorno: in particular, to the writings of Friedmann, Banfield, Lopreato and Pitkin. By doing so, we intend to contribute to the knowledge of facts largely understudied until now. Though some of the works of these US social scientists – particularly those by Banfield – have been carefully scrutinized, the quantity and variety of their contributions have been missed. And no comparison has yet been attempted between their approach and that of their Italian counterparts.

A different attitude towards history

A main difference between the two groups regards history. History was the keystone of de Martino's approach. In his *Naturalismo e storicismo nell'etnologia* (1941), de Martino – following his mentor, the liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce (Saunders 1993) – claimed the pre-eminence of history over all the social sciences and especially anthropology and sociology (de Martino 1941: chap. IV), because these disciplines, he argued, ignored the human authorship of social events. Only history provides true knowledge: knowledge of the human will in its struggle with historical conditions. In his subsequent volume, *Primitive Magic*, a major theme of de Martino's, he blamed both past anthropologists – for example Tylor and Frazer – and contemporary highbrows for their ethnocentrism, which had led them to regard magic as *false* (Zinn 2015, 5). They had missed – according to de Martino – the historical process revolving around magic. It was a process engendered, he argued, by man's will to achieve 'a safe presence in a world of definite facts and events':

> Another era, and a historical world – *the magic world* – different from ours, were engaged in an effort to create individuality, a feeling of being-within-the-world, and a presence, so that what is for us a given fact, at that stage of history was a task and it was slowly growing up as an achievement. (de Martino 1948: chap. II, 191, 1988: chap. II, 149)

In this book, de Martino better qualified his interpretation of historicism by criticizing the *lazy* and dogmatic historicism that, owing to its ethnocentrism, was unable to look beyond Western society. He claimed that, no differently from the Western world, the *magic world* – apparently irrational – possessed reality and an inherent logic, and could be studied through a historical approach (de Martino 1948, 1988: *Preface to the first edition* and chap. I, 1949, 412 ff.).[1]

In de Martino's subsequent books, *Magic: A Theory from the South* (1959, 2015) and *The Land of Remorse* (1961, 2005) – unlike the previous two, primarily based on fieldwork – the historical dimension would emerge again. When dealing with facts such as the belief in the *evil eye* or the form of possession related to the bite of a mythical tarantula, de Martino affirmed that historicism is expected to understand culturally-determined consistencies underlying social behaviours apparently irrational (1961, 2005, chap. VII). In his reconstruction of cultural dynamics, de Martino took great care in defining a process that he called the 'de-historicising of events'. A process meant reducing the angst associated with an adverse event by assigning it to a timeless, metahistorical context, so that ultimately one is allowed to 'be in history as if he weren't in it' (1959, 2005, chap. 8).

If we look now at the American authors, we cannot help noticing an utterly different approach. Banfield's work, in which one might find faults (Marselli 1963; Silverman 1968; Davis 1970 and Banfield's reply 1970; Miller 1974; Muraskin 1974; Cancian et al. 1976), but certainly not that of being theoretically ambiguous, is a good example. On the first page of his book, he described what he regarded as the problem of Chiaromonte's *backwardness*: a problem inseparable from its culture and concerning the present time. The problem Banfield identified was the lack of voluntary associations, which 'is a very important limiting factor in the way of economic development in most of the world'. Having said that, and without mentioning any Italian literature bar, later, *Pinocchio* and *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Banfield described the cultural and organizational differences existing, *at that time,* between Montegrano, Basilicata, and St. George, Utah (Banfield 1958: *Introduction* and chap. One). Friedmann, for his part, paid relatively more attention to the past: his study about the fight against illiteracy in the Mezzogiorno begins with a description, admittedly short, of the history of illiteracy in Italy (Friedmann 1960, I); his article about 'La Miseria' contains some observations on the history of the Mezzogiorno, but moves rapidly to a description of its present cultural traits, such as the peasant's incapability to work together with his neighbour 'in the solution of the most insignificant problem of his daily life' (Friedmann 1953, 224). Pitkin, in turn, when describing the personal relationships (1959a) or the wedding dowry (1960) of the peasant population of a small town in South-Central Italy, ignored its history, despite this town having a millenarian past. As for Lopreato, his volume begins with a chapter on the history of the Mezzogiorno (Lopreato 1967: chap. 1). His critics considered his historical introduction poor. Still, they admitted that a historical reconstruction was not the justification for his work (Stinchcombe 1969). Indeed, the focus of this book too was on the present: so much so that Lopreato, when dealing with the problem of overcoming the *peasant despair*, suggested a solution deriving not from the history of that society but from its encounter with the 'modern' culture of immigrants returning from North America.

To the historical explanations, the US authors preferred the reasons for the present interaction between environment, attitudes, and the inner world. To history – in line with the Chicago School of Sociology – they preferred life stories, like those recommended by Peck to Scotellaro. The US faith in praxis (Saunders 1997) suggested not only that the causes of lack of development lay in the present but also that the past would not have prevailed on it.

From all this, US researchers derived a further motivation for confining themselves to current social events. These events were absorbing, and in analysing them, they could draw on appropriate training and experience.

Banfield had done research for the Farm Security Administration during the New Deal and had later obtained a PhD in Political Science from the University of Chicago. Lopreato had attended courses in anthropology and sociology at the University of Connecticut and was studying mathematical logic applied to sociology for his PhD at Yale. Peck had obtained a degree in Political Science from the University of Chicago. Pitkin was working for his PhD in Anthropology at Harvard. Friedmann, by contrast, had a philosophical training (a degree in Philosophy from the University of Rome) and had taught Philosophy at Lafayette University in Arkansas; he had at the same time obtained research funds from the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Ultimately, these US authors were focusing both on the environment of the towns they were researching and on the social actor's inner world. They were exploring all that by using interviews, participant observation and life stories. Their approach, in tune with the teaching of the Chicago School, was not only eminently empirical but contextually-based as well. A few years earlier, William Foote Whyte, in a book highly praised by both sociologists and anthropologists, had used participant observation to analyse the culture, environment, attitudes, social balances and change of an Italo-American community in Boston, Mass. (Whyte 1943). So, to these US researchers, it seemed sound to try and do the same with communities in Southern Italy.

Quite different was de Martino's view. Confident in his philosophical and historical training, he would consider historical documents and their critical evaluation as a defence against the 'inevitable empiricism' of ethnographic research (de Martino 1954, 941–942). Consequently, he would base his research on a combination of historical-ethnological documents and studies in mythology, religion and paranormal phenomena. Precisely against those US authors working in the Mezzogiorno and their scanty Italian following, de Martino claimed in 1952 that 'applied anthropology' was unsatisfactory because of its total lack of a historiographical method (de Martino 1986, 120). In his subsequent studies, admittedly, the scope dedicated to analysing the past would be reduced, and his interest in fieldwork in folklore proportionately increased. Thus, in his *Sud e magia*, he showed increasing interest in current events as registered by participant observation. Nevertheless, de Martino would stay true to his belief that history is *not* something 'in the past and outside' (de Martino 1941, 58); but, on the contrary, it is in the present: it is an eternal becoming.

Two visions of the determinants of change and development

The issue of change and development brings into sharp relief the differences between de Martino and US researchers. First, it might be worth remembering that, though not all sociology has been knowledge oriented to social change – as in Marx and Engels – change is in the DNA of sociology: a science born out of the transformation induced by the Industrial Revolution and the search for new balances. In anthropology, by contrast, the interest in understanding traditional balances had long prevailed over the interest in transforming them. And even the interest in change, evinced by the anthropology of Malinowski and his followers, had a limited scope: a change in colonial societies that would have had to reckon, nevertheless, with the socio-cultural features of their traditions (Malinowski 1929). This picture, however, was in full transformation in the 1950s, owing to the new international political relations following WWII. The result was that a large part of anthropology had become *discourse on the development* of less-advanced societies. Therefore, when the US researchers came to Italy, the gap between sociology and anthropology as to their interest in change was fading: a promising step towards a better understanding.

The problem of change represented, indeed, the raison d'être for the presence of most US researchers in Southern Italy. Their work aimed to identify and remove the causes of the lack of development of this region, which nevertheless belonged to a relatively advanced country.

Concurrently, their work was expected to provide a development model suitable for a country belonging to the Western block. This is a crucial point. The concept of 'development' had become a pawn in the Cold War: a pillar of the new struggle for worldwide hegemony between the US and the Soviet Union. In 1948, President Truman, aware of the new role of the US as a world power, inaugurated the 'Development Age' with his *Point Four*: 'a bold new program' for providing 'peace-loving people' with 'the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas' (Truman 1949, 5: 114; Rist 2019: chap. 4, 69 ff.). A few years later, Rostow (1952) presented the manifesto of the development model proposed by the US. It advocated a transition from tradition to modernity within the orbit of the Western world and in accordance with the British Industrial Revolution stages. The underlying aspiration was that this would lead to well-being for everyone: not to a society with a few millionaires and destitute masses, as most Marxists of that time thought. And it would be achieved with a little help from the US and by relying on the anti-Marxian concept that development is rather the result of culture, organization, and psychological attitudes than of material resources (Solivetti 2005).

Against this theoretical-political backdrop, US researchers were facing a challenging task. The 'development package' that Marxist authors were proposing in those days – massive State interventions in the economy, eminent domain, forced collectivization of the means of production etc. – was irreconcilable with the mindset of US researchers. George Peck, apropos of that model, said that 'it associates the peasants' expectations with the windfall of a Byzantine despotism' (Peck 1989, 71). Concurrently, a development model based on technical expertise and machinery, in line with Truman's *Point Four*, would have been against their experience as social scientists. Thus, they inclined towards a development model *à la* Max Weber, inasmuch as they focused on a problem of culture, namely the attitude towards poverty, associationism and cooperation allegedly expressed by the inhabitants of the Mezzogiorno. In Banfield's view, no doubt, but also in that of other US scientists in Italy, the influence of the concept of social capital can be perceived: a notion that Lyda Hanifan had used, years before (1916), to summarize the qualities of mutual trust and cooperation that had led to the improvement in well-being of a West Virginian community.

The US sociology of those days, moreover, provided relevant assumptions concerning change and development. Merton (1949: Part I, chap. I, 27–37) had offered considerations suitable to the task facing his compatriots in Italy and relevant to issues near and dear to de Martino. Thus, in discussing functionalist anthropology, Merton observed that: (1) social usages could be functional for some groups, and dysfunctional for others; (2) what has been functional in the past is not necessarily functional in the present; what works in small, traditional communities often does not work when they develop; (3) one must acknowledge the existence of alternatives to practices and beliefs regarded as indispensable. In particular, against Malinowski's assumption of 'the functional necessity for such mechanisms as magic' (Malinowski 1926), Merton, recalling a work by Parsons (1949, 58), suggested that functionally equivalent, 'modern' mechanisms could work just as well.

In short, behind US researchers in the Mezzogiorno was specific literature and a shared persuasion that the past was not necessarily good; that traditions that appeared functional to the *total social system* were convenient to certain groups only; that time-honoured usages and beliefs – such as magic – could be advantageously replaced by modern, lay practices; and that a change in social usages was at least as important as one in structure.

In light of this theoretical background, the American researchers' answers to the development problem become more understandable. It was a matter of taking action on the core of their analysis – namely culture – by substituting new and better functions for old and obsolete ones. For instance, depending on author, it would have been a question of attracting, by means of specific benefits, teachers from another region and another culture to counter the non-cooperative attitudes of amoral familism; or of taking advantage of the presence of former emigrants returning from the US, to introduce values of optimism and trust in order to defeat the peasants' traditional despair and humiliation; or of favouring the action of private voluntary associations, to prevent a relapse into illiteracy, and so on.

This US-inspired vision of change and development contrasted with its utter rejection by an entire generation of Italian intellectuals, most of them close to the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and, as such, expected to share the Party's hostility to policies associated with the so-called 'foreign imperialist State'. Although their hostility focused in particular on Banfield (Ferragina 2009), their criticism extended to other US authors (Cerase 1968): and some of these intellectuals even suggested that those overseas researchers were involved in intelligence activities (De Masi 1976a: *Introduzione*, 15, 1976b). This allegation, made without providing any substantiated evidence, was rejected by those acquainted with the US researchers in question (Marselli 1976), who defined it 'a foolish, dirty trick' (Rossi-Doria 1976, 47–48). Italian intellectuals blamed Banfield for having disregarded the Mezzogiorno's history. All the more so, because he had presented culture as the core reason for the absence of collective action and economic development, and a cultural repositioning as therapy, suggesting that little could be expected from merely injecting public funds. This, despite the fact that as early as 1946, the PCI's leading expert on the *agrarian question*, Emilio Sereni, had exposed property relations – something belonging to the mode of production, not to culture – as the main factor in the Mezzogiorno's lack of development. Concurrently, he had regarded the hegemony of the rural proletariat, in tandem with that of the working class in Northern Italy, as the high road to overcome the dominion of 'new and old feudal lords' (Sereni 1946, 448–449) and a massive State economic interventionism as the key to development. This thesis, indebted to the Party's influence on the Italian intelligentsia, remained long predominant, though opposed by a few scholars supporting the models of development of Anglo-Saxon societies (Rossi-Doria 1958a; Compagna 1988), and by some leaders of the Catholic forces (Sturzo 1955) who had rejected the Communist model of development but had embraced without love the cause of economic liberalism.

It may be worth remembering that the rural proletariat would never seize power in Italy. In the years following WWII, a vast peasant movement ('Lotta per la terra'), supported by the Communist Party, arose in various areas of the Mezzogiorno (Ginsborg 1990: chap. 4). The ruling Christian Democracy Party (PDC), supported by the US Government, reacted by launching a vast land reform in 1950. The reform expropriated large Southern estates, often belonging to absentee landlords, allotted the land to landless peasants, transformed sharecroppers in low-rent cotters, and distributed benefits to small-farm peasants (Bonanno 1988; Bernardi 2004). To this reform, the Christian Democrats added a new institution: the Development Fund for the South of Italy (Cassa per il Mezzogiorno). The Fund injected huge amounts of public money into Mezzogiorno's rural areas, financed public works and infrastructures (roads, bridges, hydroelectric and irrigation projects), and provided credit subsidies to promote investments. Politically, the land reform and the Fund were successful in the eyes of the ruling Party, because they undermined the peasants' movement and established a lasting alliance between them and Christian Democracy. The impact of the reforms on the development of Southern Italy, however, has been debated (King 1971; Ginsborg 1990: chap. 4–5): unemployment decreased, per capita GDP increased, and rural areas escaped their traditional misery, but the traditional gap in development did not disappear, also owing to the concurrently rapid growth of the Northern regions. Moreover, the Fund strengthened the role of the State and consequently made even worse the lack of autonomy of the local community, which has been a historical characteristic of the *South*, sharply differentiating it from Northern and Central regions. Substantially nothing was done to combat the traditional scarcity of social capital in the Mezzogiorno.

Ultimately, the peasant movement showed that the situation in the Mezzogiorno was more territorially differentiated and less unchanging than that described by the American researchers. Concurrently, the persistence of the Mezzogiorno's development gap, despite the vast amount of public money lavished in the bid to close it, showed that the role played in development by culture was crucial, as emphasized by Banfield and other foreign researchers, but also by de Martino. Later, highly-praised contributions, such as Putnam's (1993), provided further evidence on the role of culture in the persistence of Mezzogiorno's development gap.

Yet, de Martino, in his *Naturalismo e storicismo*, showed limited interest in change, in the sense of policies aimed at transforming living conditions. In this book, de Martino, referring to the interest of Malinowski and his followers in the problem of change in colonial societies, asserted that *it* was one of politics and not of anthropology. This statement, after all, was in tune with the neo-idealist tenet that a scholar's aim is to know the world, not to transform it. Therefore, de Martino added, real anthropology had to stick to its task: 'to contribute to the growth and awareness of our being' and 'enlighten the history of Western civilisation' (de Martino 1941, IV, 202 ff.). This position is consistent with his fundamental tenet, the so-called *critical ethnocentrism*. According to de Martino, the reason for comparing other cultures (and the culture of subordinate groups) to the dominant Western culture is to reflect on the latter's characteristics. Western culture has an intrinsic superiority, inasmuch as it is the only one capable of critically studying itself because it has *reason* as its mainstay (de Martino 1962, 104–106). At the same time, Western culture's task is to critically reflect on its categories and the ethnocentrism of its cultural values and research methods to reform them (de Martino 1962, 77 ff.; Saunders 1993; Berrocal 2009).

All this belongs to a deconstruction of Western culture and civilization. It seems to have little to do with development. The development problem would emerge in de Martino's successive books, following the new interest in this issue shown by anthropology after WWII, and by contemporary Italian scholars as well. For sure, de Martino took a passionate interest in relieving the misery and social inequalities of peasants in the Mezzogiorno. In 1942, he was a founding member of the Liberal-Socialist Party, an anti-fascist and left-wing liberal group. At the same time, he engaged in a missionising project of civil religion, based on collectivity and solidarity among the people (Geisshuesler 2021: chap. 3, 49) and aimed at replacing traditional religion (de Martino 1944). Later on, he played an active role in the Italian Socialist Party in Apulia. He joined the Italian Communist Party in 1950, but distanced himself from it after the repression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. De Martino's membership of the PCI owed much to the influence of Antonio Gramsci, who, together with Benedetto Croce, was the most influential Italian intellectual of the twentieth century (Saunders 1993, 876). In particular, he was indebted to Gramsci's idea that in 'subaltern social groups', culture has both a historical character and a vital revolutionary role in the advent of a better future society (Gramsci 1948, 84–87; de Martino 1949).

De Martino strongly advocated this revolutionary role (Squillacciotti 1976, 261). In 1949, he wrote:

> All over the world, popular masses are fighting to break into history and overthrow the order that keeps them under its rule. […] Today, the liberation movement encompasses hundreds of millions of humble people, objects of exploitation and rule […]: they are colonial and semi-colonial people revolting against the dominating countries' yoke, popular masses and subjugated classes that, within the dominating countries, are slowly realising their real condition and the contradictions characterising it. (de Martino 1949, 419)

However, de Martino's new interest in change and development did not imply giving up his approach. Not unlike Gramsci – he, too, sharing neo-idealist tenets – de Martino focused on culture rather than the economy. In his works, the transformation of the mode of production did not represent the high road to change. Instead, it represented an intermediate stage of the development process, based, in turn, on another necessary change of a cultural and moral type. *What is* does not create *what ought to be*; rather, the latter generates the first. For de Martino, like other neo-idealists, thought that history was not a natural but a moral phenomenon, explained by internal motivations rather than by external causes. Within this cultural-moral perspective, change would derive not from structural transformations, but from re-orienting the wealth of traditional customs in a progressive direction, and promoting the emergence of new, lay, collective beliefs (de Martino 1949, 421).

It is not for nothing that de Martino's brilliant description of the Mezzogiorno peasant world led from one cultural phenomenon to the next, sometimes to a political fact, but rarely to something concerning the economic structure. And when this occurred, de Martino rejected the hypothesis of a direct relationship between the economic structure and culture:

> the root of Lucanian magic, as with any other form of magic, is the immense power of the *negative* throughout an individual's lifetime, with its trail of traumas, checks, frustrations, and the corresponding restrictedness and fragility of the *positive* par excellence of realistically-oriented action … Even so, this relationship between the existential regime and magic is still generic and obvious, and fundamentally rather inconclusive. (de Martino 1959, 89–90, 2015, 86)

Under the influence of these anti-materialistic premises, de Martino's answer to the problem of change ended up by accepting the Spirit's pre-eminence: a Spirit that, according to Neo-Idealism, is bound, in any real situation, to engage in a battle with historical conditions. Therefore, any change would coincide with the Spirit's struggle for its progression. And ultimately,

> that achieved through magic is a very elementary liberation; however, if mankind had not been able to achieve it, it would have been impossible to emphasise the liberation mankind is winning today, the real liberation of the 'Spirit'. And the present fight against

> any form of workers' alienation from the products of their labour postulates – as historical condition – the human effort to reclaim the first basis of that fight, the safeguarded presence in the world. (de Martino 1948: chap. 3, 258)

About ten years later, de Martino explained the Spirit's struggle concerning the here and now as follows:

> For Southern Italians, too, it is necessary to abandon the sterile embrace of the corpses of their history and open themselves to a heroic destiny that is higher and more modern than what they had in the past. […] To the extent that this will take place, the kingdom of obscurity and shadows will be chased back within its boundaries […] and it will cause the specious light of magic to fade, a light that uncertain men in an insecure society, for practical motives of existence, substituted for the authentic light of reason. (de Martino 1959: Epilogo, 184, 2015: Epilogue, 188)

And again, later 'it is up to awareness and reason to re-establish the active order of a civil transformation armed with historical knowledge' (de Martino and De Palma 1961, 382, 2005, 321).

In de Martino's works, therefore, the issue of change is very much present, but more as an aspiration and destiny than as a reality. His contribution to this issue consists in revealing the Spirit's historical progression rather than in suggesting development policies.

This view of change was bound to pose a problem for de Martino as to his relationship with the Italian Communist Party (Gallini 1977, LXXIII; Pasquinelli 1997; Severino 2003). Palmiro Togliatti, the highly authoritative leader of the Party, ridiculed him in 1952 by referring to the 'most serious investigations on the cognitive validity of witchcraft' (Togliatti 1974, 570; Bermani 1996, 21). Mario Alicata, who would become before long Chairman of the influential Cultural Board of the PCI, provided a little summary of applied historical materialism by listing de Martino's (as well as Levi's and Scotellaro's) theoretical errors. Alicata (1954) found that de Martino's works led to a dangerous confusion of *base* and *superstructure* because they did not recall firmly enough that 'primitive' culture resulted from a specific property relations framework. Secondly, according to Alicata, works such as those by de Martino, failed to distinguish, within this 'primitive' culture, the backward-oriented elements – cherished by nationalistic ideologies praising the traditional *Gemeinschaft* – from those anti-capitalistic elements capable of promoting the advent of a new society.

Conclusions: causes and aftermath of an incomprehension

When US researchers came to study the Mezzogiorno in the 1950s, social sciences in Italy were still labouring under the hostility from which they had suffered during the Fascist regime. However, a scholar such as de Martino was producing research work appreciable by, and not necessarily antagonistic to, that of overseas researchers. Although coming from profoundly dissimilar backgrounds, both contributed to the progressive acknowledgement of the role of culture as pivotal in any agenda of change and development. Today, this role is undisputed, after so many ineffective development programmes based exclusively on financial and technical grounds. So much is this the case, that any development project not providing a preliminary socio-anthropological study on culture would be regarded as utterly objectionable. In the postwar years, on the contrary, the Western development model privileged investment in technical knowledge and infrastructures, while the orthodox Communist model belittled culture by locating it in the *superstructure*.

Together with their faith in culture, both de Martino and his US colleagues regarded ethical traits as fundamental for change. For de Martino, any historical change was the outcome of an ethical choice and of spiritual motivations. The overseas researchers' works, in turn, echoed the Chicago School's idea of the existence of 'moral regions', namely areas where 'a divergent moral code prevails' (Park et al. 1925, 43–45). Moreover, the ethical trait – the community spirit – underlying the abovementioned concept of social capital should not be ignored. US social scientists tended to identify, as the cause of local *backwardness* in Southern Italy, an (a)moral character prevailing in certain regions: that is, a morally objectionable attitude, leading to a mistrust of others and an unwillingness to do something for the greater good. Therefore, socio-economic change was conditional upon the emergence of a new culture and new moral forces capable of countering asocial or antisocial attitudes.

However, this concordance about the role of culture and morality hid significant differences between US researchers and de Martino. The former regarded culture and morality as a collective conscience directing social action, as in Émile Durkheim. Therefore, they thought in terms of social models discounting the individual act. In de Martino's thinking, the community's acts jointly contribute to shaping the Spirit. Still, each act originates from a free individual will: therefore, de Martino's analyses were never sublimated into social models because this would conflict with the free will tenet. For instance, de Martino's celebrated study of funeral mourning (1958) did not generate a model like Talcott Parsons' *pattern variables* (Parsons 1951, II, V), although the first pattern, the choice – that any society must make – between affectivity and affective neutrality would seem to suit that highly-emotional social ritual. Much less did de Martino try to organize his field-collected information as a *tradition* versus *modernity* model, as certain functionalist authors were doing in those years (Hoselitz 1960).

Moreover, US researchers and de Martino differed as well in their ideas about how to deal with the Mezzogiorno's malaise. US researchers – as in general the social scientists of their time – regarded change as a zero-sum game. According to them – as we noticed before – new cultural and ethical attitudes ought to have replaced the old ones. De Martino, on the contrary, had a non-zero-sum vision of change: the future would arise only from the fusion of past and present. Moreover, US researchers believed it was possible to generate new cultural and ethical attitudes through short-range and somewhat technical policies. These policies, owing to de Martino's highbrow approach, must have appeared to him as a quick fix. If any change, and the entire process of historical becoming, has an ethical basis, the remedy for what is wrong must coincide with a thorough moral transformation. Anything else would be regarded as a reductionist approach. Therefore, a scholar's duty would not consist in finding shortcuts and contingent solutions but rather in disseminating a profound knowledge of the cultural history of the subaltern world. Only from this quest for truth could a higher consciousness stem: the giving up of 'de-historicisation' by the subaltern masses, and ultimately a progression of the real agent of transformation, the Spirit.

Ultimately, both *change* and *development* had dissimilar connotations for the US researchers and de Martino. The former regarded *change* as the realization of pragmatic measures implying the taking in of the cultural and social model peculiar to their own society, and *development* as material and social achievements in line with those attained by that society. As for de Martino, *change* was an evolution of the people's spirit that would have been original because historically unique. And the goal of that change was not only and not so much development as *progress*, the political and social self-emancipation of the subaltern masses, in an idealized future where the historical uniqueness mixed with the image (de Martino 1949, 419) of an advancing Socialist world that ignored Gulags.

Moreover, beyond these partial concordances and significant differences, history remained a real divisive factor. The disinterest in history shown by US researchers cannot be traced back to a lack of documentation because Italy has some of the world's richest archives of historical documents. The approach favoured by US authors would rather seem to be the outcome of a cultural attitude: the lingering desire to escape, or to suppress, history, that has fundamentally characterized American social sciences and that is linked to US exceptionalism (Ross 1991, xviii). The attitude of the US researchers in Italy seemed to arise from a mistrust of history on the part of those who feared it to be an expedient justification for the status quo and hence something limiting the commitment to change it. To all this, they probably added the fear that history might be equivalent to certain social theories, such as those associated with Marxism, which were so fashionable among Italian intellectuals.

The way US researchers dealt with Mezzogiorno's problems seems to echo some axioms of American pragmatism: namely, that explanatory models should be evaluated by their empirical results, rather than by their relationship with the past; that a theory's value is measured by its power to solve the problems of reality – which, by definition, regard the present day – rather than by its power to offer an emotional solace for what has already happened; that ultimately past is a prison rather than glory.

Bearing all this in mind, it is clear that the approach favoured by American researchers could not coincide with de Martino's. The Italian anthropologist, owing to his philosophical background – that is Hegel and Croce – was inclined to place, at the core of all social facts, history: the dramatic and endless movement originating from the intrinsic contradiction of any reality, which is its becoming (Croce 1907, IV, 92).

The originality of de Martino's view of history emerges if one compares it to the prevalent presentism of anthropology and sociology of his time. As a reaction to the naive speculative history of anthropology in its evolutionary period, ethnographic fieldwork studies had indulged in descriptions taking neither temporality nor social dynamics into account. Speaking about history and anthropology, Radcliffe-Brown (1952, 186, 1958, 7) declared that 'there are many disadvantages in mixing the two subjects together' as history 'gives us only a knowledge of events and of their order of succession'. Anthropological structuralism, in turn, with its universal patterns, had proposed an invariant cultural structure having an ahistorical character. Similarly, in sociology, the dominant structural functionalism had focused on the atemporal checks and balances of universal societal organization. And the new creed in development had made things even worse, owing to the persistence of social evolutionism prejudices. Often, in the development doctrine lurked the notion that the past of less-developed societies was insignificant because its present outcome was scarcely appreciable. That was the great distinction between the West and its Others. It would be necessary to wait for many years to see the emergence of a vast epistemological critique of the ahistorical character of classical ethnographic studies and a new interest in subaltern history (Fabian 1983; Thomas 1989; Naepels 2010). Moreover, despite the numerous publications that had since the 1980s tried to combine fieldwork in a community with the investigation of its past, only a few of them can be regarded as an anthropology with time and change built into it (Sahlins 1993; Palmié and Stewart 2016). Just such an anthropology seems to have been that of de Martino. On the one hand, he pioneered a critique of the cosmological and ideological principles responsible for the incomprehension of the subaltern societies' past and the misinterpretation of their present. On the other, he rejected both the presentism of classical social anthropology and the recourse to incidental history, namely the use of historical information to support anthropological studies that are substantially synchronic. He conceptualized the past in its relation to the future by proposing the re-historicisation of events: a far more idiosyncratic path to emancipation than that usually associated with the Marxist notion of historical consciousness. De Martino's thought represented a total rejection of the belief that history belonged to advanced societies only. He was far from thinking that history is a justification for the status quo, as instead his American colleagues probably thought. For him, on the contrary, only history would make it possible to understand the non-static present of societies labelled as *backward*. His work was an indictment of the advanced world's hubris that had deprived less-developed societies of all grandeur and historical dignity. While his anthropology was *not* in conflict with the historical particularism of Franz Boas and his many fellows, for their attention to the contingent and unique in the processes of culture change, his view of history makes him sharply different from US researchers in Southern Italy, British social anthropologists, and all-time social evolutionists. Ultimately, if the postwar period was that of the eruption into history of popular masses and less-advanced societies, de Martino can be regarded, in turn, as the champion of the eruption of history into the social sciences.

For US researchers, the lack of dialogue with de Martino meant they missed the opportunity to recognize the historical dimension of their own worldview and to strengthen their theses by acknowledging that history is something more than a disturbance variable. For the neo-idealist scholars, who lived on after the 1950s in Italy as well as elsewhere, the lack of dialogue meant they continued to disesteem pragmatic policies, while leaving change to the inexorable law of historical destiny.

If history was a great wedge between de Martino and his US colleagues, a no less potent wedge was that of politics. The pre-eminence that de Martino attributed to Western civilization – a key feature of his thought (Berrocal 2009, 135–136; Geisshuesler 2021: chap. 6) but also something unpalatable to the Italian Communist Party – might have been a reason for better interaction with his US colleagues: for they came from a society that regarded itself as the apogee of Western civilization. On the other hand, the aim of US researchers in coming to Italy was to explain, and if possible tackle, Mezzogiorno's *backwardness*, not to ask themselves about the a priori categories of Western civilization, as de Martino was doing with his critical ethnocentrism. Moreover, despite his steadfast faith in the *reason* of the West, de Martino, in his questioning the implicit premises of Western culture, was a forerunner of Michel Foucault, and de-constructionist, postmodern, critical anthropology. He could hardly be of much appeal to his overseas contemporaries, whose aim was to free the world from poverty, ignorance and tyranny by disseminating the American model. This perspective, in turn, seemed objectionable to de Martino, not only inasmuch as it did not respect the historical uniqueness of *other* societies but also because it did not question its cultural categories and its implicit purpose of domination (de Martino 1949, 413 ff.). For de Martino, Anglo-American anthropology 'has mainly been concerned with the practical requirements of imperialism and the control of the masses' (Peck 1950, 193), although his US colleagues replied that they 'tend to be with the *mondo subalterno* and not with the white overlord [and that] the values of our European and American cultures are always being tested in the light of other values' (Peck 1950, 194). De Martino's statements about 'imperialism' and the 'fighting masses', in turn, must have appeared to US researchers as the manifestation of an ideological, non-scientific stance. All this did not encourage a critical reflection, on their part, about their own prejudices.

On the other hand, de Martino was the typical *engagé* European intellectual: and his engagement was the exemplar for the sharp watershed between US and European social scientists. This watershed was particularly marked in those years, when in Western Europe and especially in countries like Italy, politics was not a matter of choosing between one party and the next, as of choosing between two opposite economic-political systems, in a climate of subterranean civil struggle. However, this divide in engagement between the US and Europe was bound to change. In Europe, the open engagement of social scientists was further spurred by the political movements of the late Sixties. Still, afterwards, it became negatively affected by the Soviet Union's implosion and the vanishing of Communist Parties. Yet it was much less affected than was expected by certain authors who had confidently predicted the end of a dialectical vision of history (Fukuyama 1992). In the US, instead, there has been a progressive radicalization of anthropologists and sociologists, cross-fertilized with influences from abroad, since the mid1960s: Sahlins's (1967) attack on anthropologists' involvement in Cold War projects and Howard Becker's 'Whose Side Are We On?' (1967) date back to that time. This radicalization proceeded hand-in-hand with the growing dissemination of studies revolving around counter-culture, postcolonialism, inequality, domination, gender, violence, ecology, anti-racism and political correctness (Lewis 2009). These themes are anything but absent in European social science. However, everything associated with postmodernism has particularly characterized US anthropology (Layton and Kaul 2006). Despite this new difference, de Martino's anti-positivistic message, with its emphasis on hegemony, oppression and resilience in subaltern people and his ruminative critique of social science ethnocentrism, is closer today to the predominant, open-engagement approach in anthropology, and social science in general, than it was in the 1950s: which is a primary reason for the increasing interest in his work. Concurrently, de Martino's unwavering belief in the *reason* of the West was a preventive critique of the postmodernist attack on Western rationality and of the thesis that the value of civilizations is relative: which ultimately testifies to his originality as a thinker. As for the pioneer US researchers of the 1950s, despite their accomplishments, the considerable body of ethnographic fieldwork and the pragmatic, common-sense ideas they produced, their 'scientifically objective' approach makes them appear *passé* today: as something belonging to the history, not to the present, of the social sciences.

Note

1. Benedetto Croce blamed de Martino for showing some caving-in with respect to 'the pre-1848 curious invention of historical materialism', because, in describing the *magic world*, de Martino had regarded logical reasoning as the outcome of a historical process and not as what brings history to life (Croce 1949, 193–208). De Martino took notice and atoned.

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ORCID

Luigi M. Solivetti http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7811-1224

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